

## **Generating Teacher Leadership**

By Paul D. Cooke

Teacher leadership is a principal tenet of the Houston Teachers Institute. In each of our three years of operation from 17-25 teachers have comprised our leadership team, some of whom have never participated before. Though we begin each year with such a number of teacher leaders, in each of the first two years of the program only about ten teachers formed the core of strong leadership for the Institute.

Established in December 1998 under the guidance of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute and underwritten by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, the Houston Teachers Institute is a partnership between the Houston Independent School District and the University of Houston. The Institute replicates, as closely as possible, the 20-year-old model developed by Yale University and the New Haven, Connecticut public schools. In that model, fifteen-week academic seminars are offered by university professors to public school teachers each fall. Through this annual set of seminars the Institute builds relationships between University faculty and school teachers in order to strengthen teachers and teaching in the city's public schools. To carry out its program, the Institute relies heavily on the participation of a small group of teachers, each of whom acts as the official representative of the Institute to his or her school, and the school's representative to the Institute.

### **Reliance on Teacher Leadership**

The Institute's teacher-leaders guide their colleagues into the Institute program and help orient and support them once they become involved as Fellows. Each of them is given a stipend of \$500 for their efforts. From this group as well come the six seminar "Coordinators," teachers chosen by the Director each year to act as a liaison between the seminar and the Institute office, caring for the business of each of their seminars, and aiding both faculty and Fellows in creating and finishing the curriculum units that are so much a part of the Institute program. Coordinators receive an additional \$500 stipend. The leadership of these teachers is to be a manifestation of teacher "ownership" of the Institute; it is not simply to be a practical exercise in recruitment and administration. It is hoped that some of this spirit of taking personal responsibility — "ownership" — will be carried by these teachers back to their schools and realized there. Because of the Institute's emphasis on teacher leadership we can rightly see the program as a place where teachers are trained and encouraged to be leaders in their schools.

Each of our Teacher Representatives understands that one of the chief tenets of the program calls for teachers to take responsibility for their own professional development, and that this includes taking responsibility for their part in making this program for

professional development a success. Over the past two years some of the teachers in this group have been very successful in carrying out these responsibilities, while others have found it difficult — or have not tried very hard — to carry them out.

### **A Brief Review of the History of Our Leadership Teams in Houston**

The first year's leaders came to us in response to a memo sent out from the central school district office in September of 1998 announcing the formation of a new professional development program for teachers based on one developed at Yale over the past two decades. Some teachers may have been asked by their principals to attend, while others came on their independent volition in response to the invitation distributed through the principals of the sixty high and middle schools throughout the District. About 25 teachers representing some 20 schools came to these formative meetings in the fall of 1998. From among this original group, seven teachers are still active and are among our leaders.

During the first autumn when seminar topics were being selected and applicants were being recruited at the involved schools, these teachers were told that the seminar topics would not be chosen by UH faculty, but by them. They were asked to involve their colleagues at each campus, requesting suggested seminar topics. Then these teachers — or Teacher Representatives as they are called — worked together to narrow down one hundred suggestions to about one dozen possibilities. After UH faculty members were found to lead six of the final 12 teacher-generated choices, the teachers again took the lead in soliciting applications from their fellow teachers on their campuses. Through their efforts fifty additional teachers applied to become Institute Fellows for the coming year's program. When we had received all 75 applications (including 25 from our Teacher Representatives), a group of six teachers — our first Coordinators — became an admissions committee, reading all the forms and apportioning each applicant to a seminar. When the seminars were under way in February, 1999, these six teachers formed our Coordinators Committee, meeting with me weekly during the seminar term to discuss the progress of the program and to remedy problems that arose. And when the Yale model did not quite fit our needs, these teachers often suggested alternative ways of doing things that seemed more suitable for Houston.

When our first year of seminars came to a close in the fall of 1999, as the Institute Director, I sent a memo and application form to every participating teacher — about 63 persons in May of 1999 (some 12 of our original 75 teachers having not finished the program) — inviting applicants to apply for teacher representative positions in all participating schools. The memo did not presume the present set of leaders would want to continue, but it provided for their reapplication for another year if they so chose. Eleven of the original twenty-five reapplied and all were chosen to continue as Teacher Representatives from their schools in the second year of the program. Six new TR's joined us for our second year (2000), so that in our second year we had a TR leadership team of 17 teachers (one per school, with three of our participating schools now without an official Teacher Representative). Of these six new Teacher Representatives, three had

been involved in a seminar in 1999, while the other three were brand new recruits to the program.

A similar procedure to the TR application process of fall, 1999, took place in the fall of 2000. Of the 18 teachers who now comprise our 2001 TR leadership team, nine have been on one of our TR leadership teams before, four new TRs have come on board who have been involved as Institute Fellows in the past, and the last four new TR's are new recruits to the Institute, having only joined us this summer.

### **Why Do We Lose Teacher-Leaders, Why Have We Retained the Ones Who Have Stayed, and How Do We Find New Ones?**

Some of our teacher-leaders did not realize, especially the first year, that the program was rigorous and demanding of both time and energy. Early on in 1999 it became evident that several of our TRs were overextended and unprepared to make the necessary commitment to participate in the program, much less serve as a leader. A few did not finish their seminar or their unit. Many HISD teachers are burdened with extracurricular demands on their time at their schools. The effort to travel to UH late in the afternoon once a week was simply more than some of our teacher leaders were ready for after a hard day at work; it simply took them a month of trying to do this before they realized it. Seminars start at 5 PM — prime traffic time.

In addition to the fact that some of our teacher leaders — the Teacher Representatives — were overextended, it is also true that our first year's program was not as organized and hence not as effective as it could have been. Both faculty seminar leaders and our Fellows were equally unsure of how the seminars were to be run. This led to some unevenness in the seminars and some disenchantment among some participants. Some teachers found the range of preparation of their colleagues too wide to tolerate: it was hard to be in a class with some who knew so much more or so much less than they did. It should be noted that other teacher-leaders in the same seminars in which some found much to blame, found things not bad at all, but rather delightful, and returned the next year and are still involved, now for a third year. One would think that the teachers who had the most positive, problem-free seminar experience would be the most enthusiastic ones, and this was often the case. And yet three of our teacher leaders in 2000 came from the two 1999 seminars in which there were the most difficulties. I don't think there is any one reason why these three teachers remained enthusiastic about the Institute in spite of all that, but if I had to provide a theory I would say it is this: they wanted to be at the University learning new things with a faculty expert they respected, and they were willing to overlook the rough spots to get what they really wanted. But some of the teachers who dropped out because they felt overextended might have been willing to stay the course if, having made the necessary sacrifices in other areas to continue coming, they had found their Institute seminar experience thoroughly satisfying. The fact that for some this was not the case simply made the decision to leave the program less difficult.

However, many of our teacher leaders found what they were looking for in the Institute's seminars during its first year, and thought the experience rewarding enough to impel

them to stay on as Teacher Representatives for a second year and participate in another seminar the following year. I think these teachers saw that the program provided a very enjoyable vehicle for engagement with learning and that it enabled them to bypass all the disagreeable complications that go along with registering for classes in the normal way, and studying with those who are neither adults nor professional teachers.

The teachers involved in leadership positions tend to enjoy being consulted and seeing their advice listened to and applied. This, in their experience, was a novel outcome and became, I think, another reason for the program's popularity with those teachers who became our strongest leaders. Genuine involvement through taking on responsibilities and having the Director's ear in a way that appears actually to make a difference helps very much to encourage some of our leaders and prompts them to stick with the program. They like having a stake in making the Institute a success. Our strongest teacher-leaders believe the program is something worthwhile; they see their involvement truly makes a difference.

### **If Teachers Are to be Leaders, It Is Most Important to Listen to Them**

In Houston, our annual search for a set of seminar topics to teach the following fall, spearheaded by the TRs, is one area, for example, where teachers can feel a sense of ownership over the program, and if this is permitted, it generates a sense of personal responsibility about the program's success. Our annual campaign to recruit applicants is another area in which teachers exercise leadership and offer advice. As we work together to solicit applications, we consult on schedules, the content of publicity material, and on the content of the application form. The teachers arrange for visits by the Director to their schools, so that together they can talk to school faculty. The six teachers who become coordinators each December, a job that then lasts through the fall, are responsible not only to be an admissions committee, but meeting together weekly from January till May, they form a steering committee, too, that keeps track of the progress of the Institute seminars. In these meetings a sense of camaraderie and shared commitment will easily grow if the meetings give the teachers a sense that their participating counts. They get this sense because they are listened to.

In leadership meetings and in spending time with our teacher leaders, I have asked their advice frequently. I have tried, too, to keep them abreast of a wide range of Institute issues, including fundraising, relations with HISD and UH administrations, and recruiting. I try to be frank and to treat the teachers as the important advisers I believe they are. I try to respond to their requests for help as fully and quickly as I can. One should make an effort to demonstrate to teacher leaders that their views count, that when they speak, they are listened to, and that teachers and the director are partners together in making the Institute a success.

The process of asking and using advice and sharing in decisions is built into the blueprint the Houston Teachers Institute received from Yale in 1998. If the blueprint is consulted and followed, teachers who like the program can feel, rather easily, that they are advocating something that is truly theirs when they talk about the program in their

schools. I think I can say that when we meet in our TR committee it is not hard for them to feel that we are the heart of the program and that without us it will not prosper.

I would conclude this point by saying that the Director must not be afraid to solicit advice from teachers and to take it whenever possible, or to help the teachers shape policy together. It is important, once a good idea or suggestion is offered to the Institute and taken by the Director, that it not be dropped. By following it up and then announcing its fate, the Director proves he or she values those who gave it. If one is afraid of extremes, or of a little anarchy among teacher leadership, one can take comfort from the probability that there will be those teachers in one's councils who will be as fervent moderators of radical or personal programs as he or she could be. And it is a good idea to consider that a little wild fire is better than no fire at all. The Director must be concerned about giving the teachers the opportunity to get excited about the Teachers Institute and not throw the wet blanket of the desire to control everything on top of such fire.

The Director has to take care that the Institute succeeds in two distinct areas: 1) actively and tirelessly recruiting new teachers who appreciate the value of the Institute, and 2) making sure that the Institute's seminar leaders are thoroughly prepared for the special nature of the program the collaborative aspect of the seminars. Professors are not to be authoritarian providers of information, but colleagues and collaborators with the teachers. When interested teachers experience this collegiality in the seminar room, leaders will emerge to help continue the rewarding experience. Seminar leaders who understand the program's aims are perhaps the Director's strongest asset if one speaks in terms of generating teacher leadership. If the program is substantial — well-run seminars led by thoroughly prepared faculty filled with interested and committed and prepared teachers — teacher leadership will not be hard to find.

The Director facilitates the emergence of leadership that is already there among those who most value the program. He or she must simply find those teachers and give them — and their leadership potential — a chance to emerge.

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